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THE EVOLUTION OF THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL

III. THE PROPHETS OF THE EIGHTH CENTURY

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The history of every great religion is at times the history of a great man or a group of great men. Spiritual and ethical insight comes to great souls, and it is only as they lift their fellows to their plane of vision that advances are made. It thus happens that the progress of the religion of Israel in the eighth century B.C. is bound up with the personal experiences and thoughts of four men—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah.

As noted in a previous paper, the ninth and eighth centuries were times of great ferment in Israel, and in this ferment a new social conscience had been born. Elijah, in the ninth century, had been its exponent, and the author of the E document had collected social laws shaped in response to it, but with the shepherd-prophet Amos, the earliest of the eighth-century literary prophets, there began a new movement upward and forward.

The teaching of Amos embodied four important elements, two of which, if not entirely new, were put with such new emphasis as to be practically so.

The first of these elements or doctrines is monotheism. The monotheism of Amos was not a philosophical theory of the universe; Amos did not declare that there is and can be only one God. It was a practical monotheism reached apparently in consequence of the prophet's personal experience of the righteousness and power of Yahweh. However he attained his faith, Amos clearly believed that Yahweh ruled all the nations. He does not, like the E document, recognize the reality of other gods, nor like Jeremiah formally deny their existence. He simply ignores them and tells how Yahweh rules the nations. Yahweh brought the Philistines from Caphtor and the Aramaeans from Kir (Amos 9:7). The Phil-

istines, Damascus, Moab, Edom, and all nations are responsible to Yahweh for their acts and are to be judged by him (chaps. 1, 2).

This monotheistic thought of the shepherd of Tekoah was big with the fate of the progress of the race. Egypt's thinkers had begun to grope after a sort of monotheistic thought earlier than the fourteenth century, but never really reached it in any practical way. Of the conceptions proposed by Ikhnaton (Amenophis IV) they would have none.¹ The Babylonian priests at some period had conceived all the other gods as different forms of Marduk,² but the conception had never become of practical religious value. In India, perhaps as early as Amos, men were talking of the Brahma, or Brahma-Atman, as the ultimate principle of life,³ but potent as the idea was in later Indian thought, it never exerted the creatively ethical influence upon the race that the monotheism of Amos has done. Some⁴ have supposed that Amos was influenced by the abstract thought of the priesthoods of Egypt and Babylon—that he gave practical expression to a monotheistic conception that was, as it were, in the air. When, however, one sees how unaffected Palestinian shepherds today are by systems of thought which have dwelt for centuries in the cities of their own land, he is slow to believe that Amos was at all aware of the speculations of distant priesthoods. His thought grew out of the old conceptions of Yahweh as a holy and jealous God, and the ethical and spiritual discoveries of his own soul. These he applied in the terms, not of abstract thought, but of practical ethical endeavor, and his conception and his application of it were shared by the other literary prophets of the century. The monotheism of Amos became effective because it was closely coupled with his ardent championship of social righteousness. In the eighth century Israel was economically very prosperous. The rich were growing richer, the poor, poorer, and the rich were oppressing the poor. Social cor-

¹ See Breasted, *History of Egypt*, 2d ed., chap. xviii, and Steindorf, *Religion of the Ancient Egyptians*, pp. 57 ff.

² See the text translated by Pinches in the *Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, XXVIII, pp. 8 f.

³ Cf. Bloomfield, *Religion of the Veda*, pp. 87, 211.

⁴ So Baentsch, *Altorientalischer und israelitischer Monotheismus*.

ruption was fostered not only by wealth, but by religion. Amos proclaimed Yahweh as the God of social righteousness. Yahweh demanded justice and fair play for the oppressed, purity and chastity in personal life (see 2:6, 7; 5:11, 12, 14, 24; 8:4-7). Yahweh had of all the nations of the world chosen Israel alone, but this choice, far from being a guaranty of his favor, demanded of her a higher righteousness (3:2). In this aspect of his teaching, Amos continued and intensified the message of Elijah.

The religion of Yahweh as conceived by Amos was not only socially ethical, but it was that alone. There was in it no place for ritual. Sacrifices and burnt offerings had no place in it. These, Amos declared were no part of Yahweh's original covenant (5:25). In most emphatic terms he proclaims Yahweh's displeasure and even abhorrence of the sacrificial feasts (4:4, 5; 5:21-24). In that age of the world, when in every land animal sacrifices were regarded as a necessary element of religion, this was a very radical position.

As the message of Amos was a call to righteousness, it was also a proclamation of punishment. That sin brings doom—that Israel's sin will bring punishment and destruction to Israel—is stated by him in many forms (3:2, 11, 12; 4:2, 3, 12; 5:1-3, 27; 6:1, 2, 7; 8:10-14). This threat of punishment is the only motive for a righteous life which Amos presented. He assumes that the people can do right, and that if they so do, all will be well, but the one reason which he urges to persuade them to righteousness is the fear of doom.

The preaching of Amos came as a bugle-call to awaken the conscience of the nation. Though Yahweh was bound to them by covenant, not by kinship, many had lulled themselves into security by the heathen doctrine that their God could not abandon them. Amos awakened such by threatening doom to wicked Israel—a doom all the more sure because she was Yahweh's chosen—reminding them that Yahweh was with them only on condition that they sought good, not evil (5:14, 15).

Great as was the message of Amos, it was in some respects defective. Fear of punishment is not the highest motive for right doing; but Amos offered no other. Yahweh, as proclaimed by him, was an ethical, but not a loving, God. As Amos portrayed

him, he was cold and unfeeling. These defects in the preaching of Amos were soon supplied by his younger contemporary, Hosea. Larger vision of God has often entered a soul through a door opened by sorrow. This was true of Hosea. A man of tender and loyal affections, he had married a wife whom he dearly loved, but who proved to be untrue to him. As he yearned over her, pondering on the heart-breaking blight that had fallen on his life, he saw in it a revelation of the relation between Yahweh and Israel. The covenant of Sinai was a covenant of marriage. The unethical worship which was practiced by Hebrews all about him was in his view really worship of Baal. It was as much infidelity to Yahweh as Gomer's life with her lovers was infidelity to Hosea. But the heavenly husband was not less loving than the earthly, and the measure of his own unquenchable love for Gomer became to Hosea a revelation of Yahweh's unconquerable love for Israel. Gomer left Hosea's home and led the life of a fallen woman till she fell into slavery; Hosea then bought her back, placed her apart where she was protected from her own evil propensities, and tried to win back her affection. So he believed Yahweh would bring affliction upon Israel—would bring her into the wilderness apart, where he could court her again and win back her love.

Thus Hosea became the prophet of the love of Yahweh—not love as it had been crassly conceived in the worship of the old Semitic goddesses of fertility, but the pure love of an affectionate husband—a love that survives the grossest wrong. In his interpretation of the love of Yahweh, Hosea supplied a new motive, and that the most powerful, for reform and ethical righteousness. Israel's sin not only injured herself, but broke the heart of Yahweh. Yahweh did not stand apart from her struggles as a threatening judge; he stood ready to help with all the inspiring influences of an infinitely loving companionship. Hosea fully shared the ethical enthusiasm of Amos. He falls not a whit behind that prophet in proclaiming Yahweh as a God who loves righteousness, champions the oppressed, punishes wickedness, and takes no delight in ritual and sacrifices; but he employs the various figures of the tenderest family relationships as symbols of Yahweh's love in his endeavor to make his contemporaries realize this hitherto unsuspected aspect of

Yahweh's character—this new interpretation of the covenant of Sinai—this new motive to righteous living.

In the kingdom of Judah the prophet Isaiah a little later, perhaps before the death of Hosea, took up the message of Amos and Hosea, and continued in various ways to proclaim it through a ministry of forty years. The great poetic gifts of Isaiah and the close relation in which he stood to the kings Ahaz and Hezekiah have made his name the most prominent of all the prophetic circle, so that the work of other prophets has been attributed to his pen. His genuine prophecies, however, exhibit the same monotheistic conceptions, picture Yahweh as possessing the same passion for righteousness in his people, and as feeling the same abhorrence of the religious ceremonies of unethical men, that appear in the works of his two predecessors (see, e.g., Isa. 1:12-17). This gifted aristocrat and adviser of kings champions the downtrodden poor with all the ardor of the Tekoan shepherd.

Isaiah, like his earlier contemporaries, saw a vision of a higher religious life. He believed that Yahweh demanded that life. It was a life essentially ethical. The ritual of the day with costly holocausts had no place in it. With all his gifts he sought to make his people see his vision and live this life. Sometimes he compares Israel to a stupid child (1:2, 3), sometimes to a vineyard (5:1-7). In each case Yahweh, the father or owner, is keenly disappointed in the returns which he gains from his possessions. If the figures are not as often from the same tender sphere as those of Hosea, the lesson taught is the same, and it is embodied in poetry of greater literary charm.

In one respect the conception of Yahweh presented by Hosea and Isaiah was defective. Both thought of him as caring chiefly for Israel, and as caring for other nations only for their influence upon Israel. Isaiah, for example, speaks of Assyria simply as the rod with which Yahweh in his anger is to chastize Israel. When the chastisement is over, the rod is to be broken and thrown away (Isa. 10:5 ff.). Yahweh is thought to care no more for Assyria than a father does for the switch with which he whips his boy; his love is centered in the boy.

In the prophecies of Isaiah we come upon the beginnings of the

messianic hope, though in this respect there is a contrast between his earlier and later prophecies. In the time of Saul and David the king himself had been the Messiah or "the Lord's Anointed," (I Sam. 24:10; II Sam. 22:51). In Isaiah's time the glories of the Davidic empire had long passed. In the year 735 a weakling, Ahaz, was on the throne of Judah. Two more powerful kings were threatening Jerusalem. Isaiah's hopes leaped forward to a time when Israel should again be ruled by a worthy prince. He took as the ideal pattern the Assyrian statesman and general, Tiglath-pileser IV, describing his ideal prince as a Wonder-counselor, a god of a warrior, a Father of booty,⁵ and a Prince of peace (Isa. 9:5). He was to be great in planning battles, terrible in fighting them, rich in the resulting plunder, and great in ability to rule the conquered territory in peace.⁶ This is the ideal of a young man in whose veins hot blood still courses. In his later years the prophet drew a different picture. In these hopes of Isaiah's young manhood, however, we have the first powerful literary expression of an ideal, which, transformed as the centuries went on, exerted a creative influence upon Christianity. Between the time of Isaiah's earlier prophecies and his later ones the prophecies of Micah, chaps. 1-3, were uttered.⁷ Micah lived at Maresha, called in the Greek period Marissah, near the modern Beit Gibrin. His home was in the foothills of Judaea, just on the Philistine border. His prophecies were uttered about 725 B.C. before the fall of Samaria.

Though living in a different environment, Micah was thoroughly at one with the other prophets of the century in his teaching. Like theirs, his faith was monotheistic; he believed Yahweh to be supreme (cf. 1:3, 4, 10-16; 3:1). His presentation of Yahweh's demands for social righteousness is no less insistent than theirs (chap. 2). The cultus of the period with its sacrifices and immoral practices, he like the others denounces (1:5). Finally Micah's threat of judgment for sin falls little short of that of Amos in the intensity of its earnestness.

⁵ The word translated usually "eternal" is here to be taken as "booty," or "prey" as in Gen. 49:27.

⁶ Duhm, whom some interpreters follow, holds that this passage comes from the time of Sennacherib's invasion, 701 B.C. Others make it post-exilic. With neither of these views is the writer able to agree.

⁷ The rest of the Book of Micah belongs to a later time—a time not earlier than the seventh century.

If Micah does not materially advance the religious teaching of the time beyond his contemporaries, he is thoroughly abreast of them in proclaiming the creative thoughts of the period.

The later prophecies of Isaiah which in this hasty glance we have time to notice are connected with the invasion of Palestine by Sennacherib in 701 B.C. Hezekiah, contrary to the advice of Isaiah, had joined a coalition to throw off the Assyrian yoke. The armies of this coalition were defeated by Sennacherib at Eltekeh. Sennacherib then proceeded southward to Lachish, where he established his throne and received the submission of neighboring peoples. He sent a summons to Jerusalem to surrender, threatening a siege and destruction if his summons were not heeded. In this crisis Isaiah declared that Yahweh would come down and protect Jerusalem and that the Assyrian should be destroyed (Isa. 31:5, 8).⁸ The prophet could denounce unspiritual ritual (1:3), but he really did not yet see that the religion of Yahweh could live without a temple. Some sort of external form was necessary for the faith; some external dwelling necessary for Yahweh.

The faith of Isaiah was signally justified. Sennacherib had sent his main army to inflict punishment upon Egypt, the strongest member of the coalition which had opposed him. While on its way to Egypt the army was attacked by bubonic plague⁹ and so decimated that the Assyrian had to withdraw. Judah paid a heavy tribute, and a number of her cities were given to Sennacherib's faithful allies in Philistia. Though Hezekiah ruled over a diminished realm, Jerusalem had escaped; the prophetic word was vindicated; the power of the hated conqueror was curbed.

The effect of this event was far-reaching. Yahweh had not permitted Judah to suffer the fate which twenty years before had overtaken Israel. He had shown, both by the word of his prophet

⁸ It is needless to say that not all interpreters concur in this view. To the writer it seems most reasonable.

⁹ This seems the real ground of the statement of II Kings 19:5, that the "angel of Yahweh smote the Assyrians" (cf. II Sam. 24:16 ff, and Acts 12:23 for the association of the "angel" with sickness), and of Herodotus (Book II, p. 141), that Sennacherib's camp was overrun at night by mice which ate up the bow-strings. Bubonic plague attacks rats and mice first and is by them spread to human beings. Cf. G. A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, pp. 158 ff., and Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible in One Volume*, p. 403, a.

and by his destruction of the Assyrians, that Jerusalem was indeed his dwelling-place, and from this time on Jerusalem occupied a new place in the affections and faith of the Jews. The lapse of more than two hundred years had already softened the aversion caused by Solomon's departures from orthodox practices in the equipment of the temple, but until this time Jerusalem had been but one of the many shrines of Israel. From this time onward it was more and more regarded as the earthly home of Yahweh, and that sentiment grew which has made it a sacred city to Jew, Christian, and Mohammedan.

If we are not mistaken, it was in connection with the events of Sennacherib's invasion that Isaiah uttered another messianic prophecy, setting forth the picture of the messianic kingdom¹⁰ which now stands in Isaiah 11:1-9. The foolishness of Hezekiah and the ruthlessness of Sennacherib had turned the prophet's thoughts again to the ideal social state. In his youth he had thought of the Wonder-counselor who should fight and conquer, who should make Judah glorious; now he thinks more of the social nature of the kingdom, and the ability of the Messiah to secure justice among its citizens. With language of marvelous beauty and images of unsurpassed power he portrays a time when the wanton passions of men shall be subdued to a higher law, the cruelty of man to man shall cease, when

They shall not harm nor destroy
In all my holy mountain,
For the earth shall be full of Yahweh's knowledge
As the waters cover the sea.

In this prophecy the social forces, the social conscience of the whole eighth century finds its highest expression, as well as the faith in Yahweh as a God of social righteousness which had animated each of the four great prophets of this century. These men, gifted with religious insight beyond their fellows and endowed with a power of expression unsurpassed in its reach while comprehensible by the most untutored, had forever made it impossible for men, into whose hearts their words sank to rest in the thought that religion could be divorced from ethics, or that God can ever be

¹⁰ Some scholars deny the prophecy to Isaiah, making it post-exilic.

pleased with the praises of those in whose hearts is no pity for the unfortunate poor or who traffic in the life-blood of their fellow-men.

The teaching of these great prophets brought to a head and crystallized into definite form the protest against the baalization of the religion of Yahweh which Elijah had first raised. The causes of this protest were in part the antipathy which people usually feel to religious practices other than their own, but other and worthier motives were present also. Canaanite religious customs were emphatically more sensual than those of the simpler nomads, and against these sensual practices the awakened conscience of the prophets revolted. What cause they had to revolt he only fully appreciates who sees a high place, like that at Gezer, excavated and beholds the countless obscene emblems which were offered as votive tokens to the deities of fertility. The wonder is that the teaching even of men like the great prophets of Israel ever lifted a peasantry, to whom such sensual indulgence was religion, out of their slough.

The prophets gained a hearing because with a higher sexual morality they linked the cause of the poor who were oppressed by the rich. The poor man, then as now, was ready to listen to one who gave him practical help in the struggle for existence, even if the teaching to which he listened condemned some cherished indulgence.

Isaiah, however, seems to have realized toward the end of his career that if the higher life, of which he and his fellow-prophets had gained a vision, was ever to be lived by his fellow-countrymen, it must be embodied in some outward form which could not be confused with the worship of the Canaanite Baals. As religion had been organized from the conquest to that time, this was not the case. Yahweh was worshiped in numerous high places, just as the Baals were. The high places of Yahweh had been high places of the Baals before they were his. He was worshiped in many of them by ceremonies which had crystallized long before his name was known in the land. No wonder that in the popular mind there was little distinction between Yahweh and Baal, or between the morality demanded by him and by them. It is not surprising, therefore, that we find Hezekiah, probably at Isaiah's suggestion, making an effort to give the worship of Yahweh a form of its own, which

should make it forever distinct. To this end he endeavored to purify it of obscene emblems and to centralize its cult in Jerusalem. Pillars and asheras, the old sexual symbols of deity, were placed under the ban, and an endeavor was made to suppress all shrines except the one on Zion (see II Kings 18:4, 22). Such a reform was in accord with the declaration so often made by the prophetic group, that the sacrifices of the popular high places were really transgressions and that Yahweh took no delight in them. It was also in accord with Isaiah's conception that Zion was necessary to the perpetuity of the religion of Yahweh; it was his dwelling-place—the city which he loved.

No doubt in this effort at reform many time-honored superstitious customs and practices were swept away. One of these was the worship of a brazen serpent (II Kings 18:4). Serpent worship among early peoples was widespread, if not universal. The excavation at Gezer has revealed striking evidence of its practice there during the Hebrew period.¹¹ This, with other symbols which obscured the ethical and spiritual Yahweh, was swept away.

On the other hand, the reform was a recognition that the new and higher religious conceptions of a people must link themselves with the religious forms of their past. Yahweh had, according to popular views, shared apparently by Isaiah himself (Is. 6:1 ff.), long had dwellings in their midst, or at least places where he habitually manifested himself. After the reform, he still had one. The ritual of the Jerusalem temple had had a continuous existence of more than two hundred years; it represented elements of worship inherited from Israel's remote Semitic ancestry. This ritual was purified and retained. Apparently Isaiah and his royal colaborer hoped that by this reform the conditions of progress had been met, and that the ideals which had been so forcefully set forth in the prophetic preaching of half a century would now be embodied in the religion and ethics of a nation. Was Judah ready for such a reform as this? We shall see in the next paper.

¹¹ See R. A. S. Macalister, *Bible Side-Lights from the Mound of Gezer*, Fig. 4, p. 76.